

## A SUMMER DAY AT ST. ALBAN'S.

The Abbey Church, St. Alban's.

Strange as it may sound to the ears of our readers, we know well an ancient and venerable town, scarcely twenty miles distant from London, many of whose inhabitants had never seen a railway train or a steam engine in the latter half of this nineteenth century. Nor is this town an ordinary town; in former times it might well have challenged the name of a city; nearly nineteen hundred years ago it was known to the Roman occupiers of this island as Verulamium, but for the last fifteen centuries it has been re-christened St. Alban's, after the first British martyr, Alban, who suffered death just outside its walls in the persecution of the heathen emperor Diocletian. It was only in the summer of 1858 that a branch line of railway was opened from Watford to St. Alban's, thus bringing the venerable city within the reach of modern influences. So strange was the sight, that a resident assured us that for several weeks after the line was first opened the departure and arrival of each train was greeted by the astonished Verulamians with cheers and shouts of admiration, and that it was only gradually that the excitement subsided.

From this fact our readers will very justly infer that St. Alban's is not only an old town, but an old-fashioned one; and it will be doing it no injustice to confess that, as towns now go, it does strike the visitor as somewhat behind the age. The straw plaiting, it is true, keeps the hands of the young women and its children busy; still there are but few signs of life in its streets; its shops, its market, its inns, measured by the present standard of excellence within twenty miles of our great metropolis, are certainly far from first-rate, and if the grass does not actually grow in its streets, it is not because the busy feet of commerce keep it down.

Yet there is one feature in St. Alban's which is far from second-rate — we mean its grand old abbey, which frowns, or rather smiles, down so calmly on the roofs of the town below, and looks across the little river, the Ver, upon the gray massive ruins of ancient Verulamium in the green meadow beyond. So we thank the railway after all for having opened up to the London excursionist and rural visitor one of the most delightful fields for summer rambles.

The ancient city which the Romans named Verulamium, and modern historians have shortened into Verulam, stood on the south-west side of the Ver, a river which seems in those days to have been of far greater size than now, when it will scarcely do more

than turn a mill, for antiquaries tell us that a ship's anchor has been found imbedded in its mud. Be this, however, as it may, two thousand years ago it was an important British city, and the seat of the princes of the Cassii, and there are not wanting zealous partisans who claim for its foundation an earlier date than for that of London. Some British coins, it is well known, bear on them the letters VER, and Camden supposes, with a great show of probability, that they were coined at Verulam.

As soon as the Romans got possession of the southern and central parts of Britain, we find Verulam promoted to the dignity and privileges of a municipium — a proof that it was already a place of some importance, though, no doubt, it owed its advancement to the zeal with which it had furthered the interests of its new masters —

*Romanes rerum dominos, gentemque togatam.*

But the same zeal which helped on its material prosperity would seem to have aided in working its fall, for we read that after laying London and Maldon (Camalodunum) in ruins, Boadicea wreaked her vengeance on Verulam, whose riches, according to the historian, Tacitus, were one great cause why the Britons attacked it, passing by other military outposts of equal or even greater importance for the 'loot' and plunder which they knew that

they should find within its walls. But the success of Boadicea was not lasting; the victory achieved by Suetonius over her ill-disciplined forces gave the final victory to the southern invaders, and Verulam gradually recovered a large portion of its former splendour.

But the fame of Verulam was largely increased by the martyrdom of Albanus, or Alban, a Roman soldier, who, having suffered during the persecution of the Christians by Diocletian, A.D. 303, was enrolled by the Church in her catalogue of martyrs as St. Alban. The story of his death is thus told by Alban Butler, his namesake, the well-known Roman Catholic hagiologist.

Albanus was a Roman by extraction, but a native and an eminent and wealthy citizen of Verulam, who, struck with horror at the cruelties which were perpetrated on the Christians, gave shelter to Amphibalus, a Christian preacher, who had fled to his house for refuge. Edified by the faith and piety of Amphibalus, he became a Christian, and when the heathen soldiers came to his house in search after their 'prey' he changed clothes with Amphibalus, and, allowing him time to effect his escape, presented

himself to the soldiers as the object of their inquiry. He was bound and led off to the judge, who happened just then to be sacrificing to his idols. When he saw Alban he was very angry at the fraud which had been practised on him, and commanded his prisoner to sacrifice to the gods. Albanus refused, and the Roman judge 'ordered him first to be scourged and afterwards to be beheaded on a hill just outside the town. The legend runs that so eager was Alban for the honour of martyrdom that, the little bridge being too narrow to admit the crowds which flocked to the place of his execution, the waters of the Ver were parted at his entreaty, just as the waters of the Red Sea had been parted by the rod of Moses, and that the executioner, converted by the miracle, threw away his sword, and fell at Alban's feet, praying to be allowed to become a Christian and to die with him. The confessor," adds A. Butler, "went on with the crowd up the hill, which was a pleasant spot, covered with several sorts of flowers, about five hundred paces from the river. There Alban fell upon his knees, and at his prayer there sprung up a fountain, with the water whereof he quenched his thirst. A new executioner being found, he struck off the head of the martyr, but immediately lost both his eyes, which fell out of their sockets upon the ground at the same time. Together with Alban, the soldier who had refused to imbrue his hands in his blood, and had declared himself a Christian, was beheaded. . Many of the spectators were converted to the faith upon the spot, and followed the holy priest who had converted St. Alban into Wales, to the number of a thousand, but were all cut to pieces by the idolaters. . . . These miracles of stopping the river and of the rising of the spring at the spot where Alban was beheaded are expressly mentioned by Gildas, Bede, and others."

The scene of these events was called Holmhurst; in after times it came to be styled Derswold Wood, and forms part of the site of , the present town of St. Alban's. A local tradition identifies a field about 150 yards distant from the east end of the abbey church as the spot where Alban shed his blood, but most probably the abbey covers the scene of his sufferings.\* The martyr died in a.d. 303, and within little more than a quarter of a century, in the reign of Constantino, a splendid church was built close to the scene of his sufferings, and was rendered illustrious, if we believe the legend, by many great miracles. The pagan Saxons destroyed this edifice; but Offa, king of the Mercians, in atonement for the misdeeds of his past life, raised another church there about 790, together with a great monastery, and endowed them with ample possessions. Several popes honoured the abbey with singular privileges and exemptions, and all the lands which belonged to it were freed from the infliction of having to pay the Romescat, or Peter's Pence.

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\* The latter theory is strongly supported by the fact that there have been several successive buildings all on the same spot, the first (called, by Matthew of Paris, Ecclesiola) immediately after the martyrdom.

But it is time that we paid a visit to the! abbey as it now stands. From the railway station we cross the river Ver on terra firma, like the martyr, only with the trifling difference of having a bridge to carry us over. We then ascend a somewhat sharp hill, at the top of which we easily find our way through a passage on the left hand to the grand point of attraction, the abbey church, which stands in a most commanding situation, and really forms a most conspicuous object from all parts of the surrounding neighbourhood. Its external appearance, when viewed from a distance, is very dignified and imposing; but this effect is marred to some extent upon a nearer view, owing to the rude confusion of colour produced by irregular mixture of Roman tiles, flints, bricks, and stones which compose its walls, and whose rugged outlines give the whole fabric an air of dilapidation which is really untrue. The tower, taking it all together, looks the most perfect portion of the whole, owing to its having been covered by a substantial coat of plaster, portions of which have of late years fallen off, thus giving a striking variety of colour to the fabric, which is constructed to a very great extent out of the ruins of Old Verulam.

The general outline of the external features of the abbey is thus described in a local guide-book: —

"The battlements are of later date than the lower portion of the tower, which is divided by bands into three stages; the uppermost exhibits two double windows on each side (latticed) having semi-circular arches, ranging beneath a large semi-circular arch; in the spandril between the large and smaller arches, and also above the former, are various diamond - shaped apertures, evidently constructed to give issue to the sound of the bells, which are hung in this compartment of the tower. Below the windows, in the middle division, are four double semi-circular arched openings on each side, which admit the light into a narrow passage formed in the walls; these also have larger semi-circular arches above them, and every double opening has a thick heavy column in the centre. In the stage beneath these are eight windows, which admit the light into the lantern.

"Along the upper part of the south and north walls of the nave extends a range of narrow pointed arches, of early English date, reaching to the transept; these appear to have been altered into this form, from round arches, and opened as windows; in the aisles below, the windows are few and irregular. The whole eastern part of the church

is furnished with plain battlements; the buttresses are strong and massive. The south-east side displays some remains of elegant flying buttresses, which rose from the aisles to the upper part of the choir, the windows of which are pointed. The chapel of the B. Virgin (now used for the Grammar School), exhibits some beautiful architecture, in the forms and ornaments of its windows, all of the early decorated style; but most of these have been mutilated, and are miserably patched and disfigured. The east end of the choir, and the extremities of the transept, are terminated by octagon turrets, rising above the roof, and embattled; two or three of these are of the Norman era; but the others are of subsequent date. On the opposite sides of the north doorway are two well-sculptured leaves, worthy of remark, perhaps, inasmuch as they form the capitals of pillars, without any other band or moulding.

" The principal entrance is at the west end, beneath a projecting porch, opening by a high pointed arch, supported on massive buttresses, and ornamented with several mouldings; the outermost moulding rests on two human heads greatly mutilated. Above the arch are shields displaying the arms of Offa, three crowns, and the abbey arms, azure, a saltire d'or. The inside of the porch has been elegantly ornamented with pointed and trefoil arches, sustained on clustered pillars of Purbeck marble, some of which have capitals of foliage, and others of the upper parts of angels, but much defaced. In the centre are three pillars clustered, with a pointed arched doorway on each side, having three pointed arches above. The doors are of oak, finely carved into trefoils, quatrefoils, roses, finials, and other ornamental forms."

Those who would desire to find a more technical and elaborate account of the architecture of St. Alban's Abbey, should study the interesting volume of Messrs. Buckler on that subject. They show good reasons for believing that the west end of the nave was adorned with two towers, and that the central tower, which now stands, was surmounted by a lofty octagonal lantern.

One cannot but own that the vast dimensions of the fabric in point of length,\* combined with the simplicity of its plan, render St. Alban's Abbey one of the most striking edifices in the kingdom, even to an eye which is utterly inexperienced in the details of Gothic architecture. But for the student of ecclesiastical art it has an additional charm in the fact that in it is to be found exemplified every era and style of architecture, from the earliest Norman down to the decadence which marks the age of the Tudors. In this respect it has been a complete school of art for the numerous restorations of pointed architecture which the spirit of the age has effected. Nor is it only in modern days that it has served this purpose, it is from the stone screens which

bound the choir and ante-choir within, that William of Wykeham took many of the details of his plans for the chapels of New College and Magdalen College at Oxford. Perhaps the most beautiful portion of the entire fabric is to be found in the tall and admirably proportioned windows of the Lady Chapel and the adjoining buildings at the east end, where the graceful and delicate outline receives an additional charm from the exquisite colours of the brick and stone which are employed, and which present a singular contrast to the bare and massive contour of the nave and the transepts as a whole.

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\* Till lately it has been supposed to be 600 feet long, and 3 feet longer than Winchester Cathedral; but careful measurement has shown it to be only 548 feet from east to west.

But, indeed, it is no wonder that such great cost and labour were spent upon the fabric, when we remember that the Abbot of St Alban's was one of the nine-and-twenty dignitaries of that degree who sat in the House of Lords as Peers of Parliament before the dissolution of religious houses, and that, as A. Butler assures us, "the Abbot of St. Alban's, however newly appointed he might be, always took in Parliament the first place among the mitred abbots, while the others sat according to the seniority of their summons, in virtue of a precedence granted to the house in a.d. 1154 by Pope Adrian IV.," who, as Nicholas Brakespear, began his religious life by becoming a brother in this monastery.

From the days of Offa to those of the Reformation, forty abbots here held sway, of whom the earliest was Willegod; the thirty-eighth (and, to all intents and purposes, the last), was Wolsey. The great cardinal and minister of state, however, never honoured his abbey by a visit, being content with receiving the income accruing therefrom; after his death, Henry VIII., who was breaking up all the religious houses in the kingdom, put in as abbots two creatures of his own — Robert Cotton, who lived to enjoy his honours only eight years — and Richard Boreman, who surrendered the abbey to the king, by whom it was destroyed. But the mayor and burgesses of the town retained so strong an affection for the fine old building, that they raised a sum of 4002., which they made over to Henry, in consideration of the abbey church being left standing, and it then became the parish church of St. Alban's.

Entering the venerable building by the great western porch, we are struck, as at Winchester, with the great length of the interior; which, though once adorned with rich decorations, is now what one might expect, a long bare empty nave.

A stone in the pavement is pointed out as the place where once stood the shrine of St Alban, and where miracles are said to have been performed through his influence. The most singular object is a flight of stone steps leading down to a vault, the door of which is kept open, though an iron gate prevents the curious from entering; through the gate we perceive what are said to be the bones of the good Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, whose dinner parties for centuries have passed into a proverb. The magnificent sepulchre to his memory was erected in the time of Abbot Whethamsted, whom Mr. Gough has styled, in allusion to his architectural skill, "the Wykeham of his time." The sepulchre was richly painted and covered with niches, which were filled with exquisitely carved statues, some of which, supposed to represent the ancient kings of Mercia, are still standing. The body of the Duke himself was discovered in the year 1703 in the vault below. "It was lying in pickle in a leaden coffin, carefully enclosed in another of wood. Since that period the skeleton has been rudely handled, bone after bone having been purloined by the curious, till very few remain. On the east end of the wall of the vault was painted on a tablet a crucifix, with four chalices to receive the blood which drops down from its wounds, while a hand from the left corner touches a scroll or label inscribed, 'Blessed Lord, have mercy on me.' " The access to this vault is secured by a trap door. Against the wall at the east end of the south aisle is an inscription in Latin, to the Duke's memory, recording his good deeds, both at Oxford and elsewhere, and his fall by the wiles of a woman.

The abbey is very rich in other monuments of a singular description. The most remarkable are those which commemorate Abbots Wheathamsted and Ramryge, both of which are enriched with heraldic devices, which, if they were not so ancient, would be set down as punning on their venerable names in a very vulgar way — being profuse in ears of corn and heads of rams, intermixed with dragon's heads, the abbey arms, and a representation of the martyrdom of Amphibalus. But in order to do justice to these relics of the past, we ought to have brought down with us one of the Kings of Arms, or a Pursuivant from Heralds' College at the least.

Among the other celebrated persons who are said to have been buried here is Sir John Mandeville, a learned physician, who was one of the earliest of English travellers in foreign parts, and one of the first writers of English prose. He is said to have spent no less than thirty-four years in his tours abroad, and to have visited not only Africa, but also the eastern and northern parts of Asia; a vast exploit, it must be remembered, for a man who died in 1371, nearly five hundred years ago, and whose results, therefore, it would be scarcely fair to compare with those of the Belzonis, the Spekes, the

Livingstones, the Barths, and the Burtons of more recent ages.

In different parts of the church some fine specimens of mural painting have been discovered, or rather uncovered, from time to time, on removing coats of plaster from the walls. A narrow staircase leads up to the large central tower, from the top of which an extensive view is obtained, but the ascent is neither agreeable, nor advantageous to ladies' dresses.

It ought to be mentioned here that, if many of the monasteries in England were haunts of indolence, the Benedictine fathers and brothers of St. Alban's would seem to have been a marked exception. Their Scriptorium or Writing Room was in those days to the neighbourhood very much what the new Reading Room at the British Museum is to Londoners of our own day. It is well known that within the walls of the abbey some of the earliest books in this and other languages were printed, including the celebrated "Boke of St. Albans," Dame Juliana Berners' "Treatise on Hunting and Hawking."

Closely adjoining the west end of the nave stands the heavy and gloomy gateway of the old abbey, in all the original massiveness of the reign of Richard II. It is still used, as it was before the Reformation, as a prison for the Liberty and Borough of St. Alban's. The great gateway is surmounted by an early pointed arch, and its roof is groined and other wise ornamented. The large extent of the courtyard belonging to the abbey may be traced from the scattered fragments of walls which once stood round the inclosure. Just before the abbey gateway is a triangular plot of ground now used as a cemetery, which is traditionally called Homeland, on account of having been, in August, 1555, the scene of the martyrdom of George Tankerfield at the stake, by order of Mary's ministers, for reading the scriptures and publicly expounding them. Inside the gateway, at the bottom of what is now called the Abbey Field, but was probably the convent garden, stands a very singular and picturesque octangular building, close by the water side. In the olden time, no doubt, it served as the boat-house or a part of the mill of the monastery; but it now is profanely turned into a public-house. It is from a spot close by this building that our sketch of the abbey above is taken.

Before bringing his "summer day's ramble" to a close, we would recommend the tourist to pay a visit to the Old Clock House in the town, to Sopwell Priory ruins, to the walls of Old Verulam, and to St. Michael's Church. In the latter is the "sic sedebat" monument of Lord Bacon, of which, and of the adjoining park of Gorhambury... The Clock Tower is described in one of the local guide-books as follows: —



" The origin and purpose of this very ancient tower are now quite unknown; and the various traditional accounts of it have probably arisen merely from conjecture, but it is generally thought that such a building existed prior to the ruins of Verulam. The traditional account generally given is that two females of the city of Verulam having wandered to where St. Alban's now stands (it being then a wood), they were benighted, and from the site of the present building first descried a light, which enabled them to retrace their steps; and in order to prevent the recurrence of such an event, to themselves or others, they caused a high tower to be erected, from whence might be more easily ascertained the way out of the wood. Another account is, that it was built for the purpose of a watch tower, to give an alarm on the approach of an enemy towards the city.

" It consists of a high square tower, formerly embattled, constructed of flint pebbles; in the interior is a stone staircase, at present in a very ruinous state. The lower part is occupied as a dwelling-house. On the top of it, during the war with France, was placed a telegraph, communicating with Yarmouth and the Admiralty, but the telegraph has been taken down. In the upper part of the tower is a bell of about a ton weight, which has been appropriated to various uses; in times past, it was rung at four o'clock in the morning to call apprentices to their work, and at eight in the evening for them to leave off; it was anciently used as a curfew, or couvrefeu bell; but it is not now used for either of those purposes, but merely as an alarm bell in case of fire, and in consequence is termed the fire bell. It is said that Roger de Norton ' caused a very large and deep-sounding (sonorosissima) bell to be made and hung up, to be struck every night at the time of curfew,' which probably was the bell alluded to. Upon it is the following inscription, in church text, and also a Roman cross, viz.: —

*De Missi Celis Sabeo Nomen Gabrielis.*

" The town clock is placed in this tower, and strikes upon the skirt of the above bell. The frame in which it was hung is extremely decayed," says the local guide-book, " and the iron-work attached to it much corroded by rust, but it has recently been restored." We may add that measures are now being taken for restoring the Clock Tower to its original state.

About half a mile south-east of the abbey, in the meadows near the Ver, stand the ruins of Sopwell, but they are so imperfect that the plan of the convent can hardly now be traced. The nuns who occupied it were Benedictinesses, and among its lady abbesses was Dame Juliana Berners, of whom we have already spoken. It is said that

Sopwell was the scene of the private marriage of Anne Boleyn with Henry VIII., who somewhat ungratefully bestowed the convent buildings on a courtier, Sir Richard Lee, from whom it passed eventually, after sundry changes, into the hands of the present Earl of Verulam.

A walk of half a mile along the banks of the Ver will conduct our visitor, by way of the boat-house already mentioned, to the ruins of Verulamium. Built as the city was on the old Watling Street which led from London to the north, it is not to be wondered at that, even in the desolation of their present ruined state, they bear on their fronts abundant testimony that they were erected at a date as early as the commencement of the Christian era, though any inquiry as to their locality addressed to the country people, is generally met by a vacant stare of wonder and ignorance, which shows that our English rural population is far less poetical than practical.

But alas, when we arrive at Verulamium, how shattered are all our previous bright imaginings! The red brick carcasses of five small cottages and those huge masses of grey stone all overgrown with ivy, do these constitute all that remains of the once great Roman town Did Caius, and Lucius, and Publius, and Marcus, and Quintus, inhabit these miserable hovels? The floors are overgrown with weeds, the walls are dilapidated and roofless, yet still it is somewhat strange to remember that the Romans, whom we know only in history, were actually living men and women when these walls were built, just the same as we who now look at them, after nearly two thousand years, are living men and women. And perhaps that archway in the long wall attracted the eyes of Julius Caesar, in the same way that it now attracts the eyes of Mr. and Mrs. John Smith. It is almost needless to add that Roman coins and pieces of tessellated pavements have been found in Verulamium in great abundance, and that antiquaries have discovered in, situ, close to St. Michael's Church, the entire outlines of a Roman amphitheatre. These remains were opened some few years since under the auspices of the St. Alban's Archaeological Society, but, having lain open for a time, were filled in again. Perhaps the day will come when we shall see exhumed the ancient *thermae*, and the floors of Roman mansions, as has been the case at Wroxeter; and let us hope that, if such a day should come, the necessary researches may be carried on with as much public spirit as success.

The view of the abbey from this point is not to be surpassed in grandeur. Messrs. Buckler, in their interesting work on the abbey,\* write as follows : —

" We may view in imagination, from among the lingering relics of the walls of Verulam,

the old abbey in the full glory and perfection of its buildings on the opposite hill, the long slope of which, from the summit to the very edge of the little river which washed the base of its outer wall, was covered to a wide extent with the quadrangles, the gate ways, the chapter-house, the halls, the towers, the turrets, and every variety of form and feature suitable to the position and destination which they held in the systematic arrangement of the entire plan. Above all this goodly array of architecture arose, as its crowning feature, the stupendous abbey church in its full proportions, with its three noble towers, the central one augmented in height and in beauty of appearance by its lofty octagonal lantern tower and tapering pinnacles."

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\* A History of the Architecture of the Abbey Church of St Alban's." By I. C. Buckler and C. A. Buckler.

In 1856, a public meeting of the nobility and gentry of the county was held ,at St. Alban's, to take into consideration the best means of obtaining a bishop of St. Alban's. Mr. G. Gilbert Scott made a careful survey of the abbey, and furnished a thorough report as to the state of the building. He estimated that the sum of 18,000?. would suffice to put the abbey into thorough repair, and fit it as a cathedral. It was determined to petition the Government on the subject, and make the offer on the part of the county to supply the cathedral, if Government would give the bishop. A committee was formed, of which a deputation had an interview with Lord Palmerston, but his reply was not favourable, and the subject gradually dropped. About 4,0002. has, however, been laid out in substantial repairs, and a very fine new organ has been erected.

As we quit the ruins and wander back in meditative mood towards the station by the meadows below the old abbey, and look up at its tower as it stands out in relief against the evening sky, the thought comes up once and again, why is not this noble abbey restored in a style worthy of its ancient grandeur, and erected into a bishop's see? The diocese of London has already grown far beyond the powers of a single individual to manage care fully : then why should not the rural districts of Middlesex be withdrawn from the jurisdiction of London, and joined to Hertfordshire, and made into a separate diocese with St. Alban's for its see? Is it too much to hope .that the necessary funds, both for the fabric and for an endowment, would be forthcoming in six months from private and public sources, if Her Majesty should be advised to create at Verulam a new episcopal see, as was done at Ripon in 1836, and at Manchester even more recently?

E. Walford, 1864.